

INTERNET TECHNOLOGY

This chapter addresses Internet technology as it relates to our public relations efforts. Since a website is often one of the first points of contact for members of the public and potential NA members, this topic deserves thoughtful attention and planning. Whatever impression members of the public get from a website is likely to have a lasting effect. The material here is designed to help areas use Internet technology in a more useful and informative way.

This chapter is deliberately nonspecific since the rapid development of Internet technology makes this material likely to become dated. As a result, specific technology or products are not contained here. What is here—some of the fellowship’s current best practices with how to effectively use Internet technology to further our primary purpose.

Core public relations principles

This section is excerpted from Chapter Two.

Anonymity on the Internet

The Internet can often give the illusion that it is not a public sphere. As a result, the issue of personal anonymity on the World Wide Web can be a confusing one. Many members, in enthusiastic efforts to carry NA’s message of recovery, have set up personal websites or weblogs. One way a personal site could respect the principle of anonymity would be to state that the site does not represent NA; it speaks only for the individual. Personal sites can also provide links to a local registered site or to na.org. Personal websites can further protect members’ anonymity by using words like “recovery” instead of specifically stating that they are members of Narcotics Anonymous. Using “recovery” instead of “Narcotics Anonymous” will help the site avoid being recognized by a search engine if someone is looking for an NA meeting or information about Narcotics Anonymous. It can also help members maintain their anonymity in this public medium.

Key topics

Core PR principles

PR & Internet technology


Planning & preparation for areas & committees


Discussing & addressing known challenges with Internet technology


Putting your plan into action


Resources


Key icons

-  Practical experience

-  Preparation and training tips

-  PR principles for discussion

 How can members practice anonymity when using the Internet?

 How can an area use Internet technology to help carry the NA message?

Public relations and Internet technology

The Internet has had an enormous impact on the growth of NA. It allows for more regular communication and provides a vehicle for making information and service resources more readily available. An area's ability to use Internet technology depends on the skills of members, their financial resources, and the information they have about how to effectively use websites and the Internet. Remember, it may not be necessary for every area to have a website; planning and prioritizing which services are most important in the area can help trusted servants decide if a website is, in fact, the best use of their resources. Areas may want to consider communicating with the local regional committee to be sure there isn't a duplication of services. If an area decides to create a local website, the following information can help trusted servants use Internet technology more effectively.

Planning and preparation for areas and committees

The key to providing useful information on a website is to allow for clear, simple navigation to the relevant information. One way to achieve this, or to improve the effectiveness of an already existing site, is by clarifying the **purpose of the site**. For example, an area may determine that the most important functions of the website are to reach potential members and the public and to support area service. Clarifying the purpose helps identify the **audiences** the area is trying to reach. Identifying the audience and what the area is trying to communicate to that audience becomes the foundation for making decisions about the content that should be included on the site. Remember, a website will reach audiences beyond the local community. It is important to keep this in mind when identifying the site's potential audiences. Some examples of audiences an area may want to communicate with are:

- 📄 **The public** (including potential members and family and loved ones of addicts)
- 📄 **Professionals**
- 📄 **Existing members**

Another way to organize a website is to simply identify the audiences as **members** and **visitors**. Either way, knowing the audiences the site is trying to reach will allow the area to be clear about the content that would be most relevant for each audience. Some examples of the content that might be relevant for each identified audience are:

- 📄 **For the public** (including potential members and family and loved ones of addicts):
NA literature, meeting information, phonenumber, and possibly referral information.
- 📄 **For professionals:**
Information about NA, NA literature, meeting information, local surveys, and a contact person who is responsible for public interactions (such as a committee chairperson or a public relations committee member).
- 📄 **For existing members:**
Meeting information, service resources such as local guidelines, NA event information, information about how to be of service, and password-protected materials like committee minutes.

Once the purpose of the site has been established, it can be designed in a way that works toward achieving that purpose. This is where having experienced local people or sufficient financial resources can make a difference. Areas are encouraged to seek help from professionals in designing their websites—this may mean using services offered by a local

member who is also a web design professional or hiring a nonmember to design the site. The area can always use the purpose and the audience to make any decisions about how the site should be designed.

The following points can help an area in thinking about website design:

- ✎ Be sure to state the purpose of the site on the front page in a simple and clear way. The purpose of a local NA website may simply be to provide information to those interested in Narcotics Anonymous and to facilitate communication and support for local NA members. Remember, the website should capture the attention of the audience in a very short period of time.
- ✎ The front page of a site should also state what information can be found on the site and what information is not contained on the site. (For example, if the site only contains meeting information for the local area, be sure to indicate that the site does not contain meeting information for neighboring areas or regions, and provide a link to a regional site that does contain that information.) The area can also link to NA World Services to provide any information that is not contained on their local site.
- ✎ The area will want to avoid creating a website with great design but minimal content or one with poor design and too much content. The site should be designed in a way that allows for easy navigation to the relevant information.
- ✎ Remembering the site's audience can help the area design the site using the most universally accepted technology available. The area most likely wants to reach as many people as possible, and using common technology can ensure that.
- ✎ Free web hosting is not considered a best practice. A decision to forgo free web hosting helps to eliminate a number of problems, the most important being the possibility of an NA website having to provide advertising or links to inappropriate sites. Free web hosting also limits how much content can be contained on the site. Using free web hosting is often the reason why local NA sites end up with advertisements. Allowing advertisements to be placed on an NA site can lead to NA being seen as associated with outside organizations. When areas have no control over the kinds of ads that may be placed on a site, the problem of association is likely to lead to controversy.
- ✎ The area needs to consider that the website is a public forum, and certain information should be kept private. Password-protected areas can serve as a private space on a public website (privacy is not the same as security—secure websites can be useful but can involve more management and greater costs). Meeting minutes containing the names and contact information of members, for instance, may best be kept private through password protection.
- ✎ When trying to make a website more secure, trusted servants must be sure to keep track of passwords. That way, if a trusted servant leaves a committee under unfavorable circumstances, the area can change the website's password. Security issues can also be lessened by creating a simple website with less encryption, and by not using free web hosting.
- ✎ Areas can make decisions about whom to link to by considering if the intended link furthers NA's primary purpose. For example, sites that provide maps to meetings are often used on NA websites with a disclaimer stating that NA is not affiliated with the map site.

- ✎ One way to provide links to other NA areas and regions is by linking to the NAWWS local phonelines and websites page (<http://www.na.org/?ID=phoneline>). By linking to the NAWWS website, an area doesn't have to use its human resources to regularly check and verify links.
- ✎ A service committee may want to investigate which organizations link to the local NA site. Following up on sites that link to us by making sure that the information about NA is up-to-date and accurate can be a great way to strengthen public relations.

Domain name/website ownership and accountability

- ✎ To ensure continuity, website domains ought to be owned and paid for by the service body. The area budget can plan for this so that there are enough ongoing resources to sustain the site.
- ✎ Since the area is ultimately accountable for the NA website, the body should establish itself as the responsible entity for the website, rather than the website being tied to a single trusted servant. An area can usually establish itself as the accountable entity by providing a mailing address (this process is similar to obtaining a bank account in the area's name). Having the website tied to the service body allows for rotation of trusted servants and eliminates any questions about ownership of the site.
- ✎ The area's email address also needs to be tied to a committee. Trusted servants should have the responsibility to regularly check and respond to email. If an area receives email, members can respond to the email by letting the sending person know that a member is getting the information they requested and will get back to them as soon as possible. Inquiries can be discussed by the ASC and, if needed, delegated to the appropriate trusted servant or committee.
- ✎ In emerging areas where there is no formal area service committee, a group of addicts can be responsible for the local NA website. A group of addicts making decisions about the local NA website is often a more prudent approach than having the responsibility fall on one individual. These trusted servants can then establish accountability through local NA groups in the emerging area.

Web servant responsibilities

- ✎ The area can clearly define the responsibilities that will be delegated to the web servant. In defining the web servant's role, the area also needs to establish that the web servant is accountable to the area.
- ✎ Members of the area can make it a practice to review the area website on a regular basis as a way to ensure that the web servant is responding to the area's requests.
- ✎ As stated earlier in this chapter, an area is best served by a website that can be easily passed along to other trusted servants. If a website is difficult to maintain, it may be hard to find trusted servants who are able to take on the commitment.
- ✎ An area may want to divide web responsibilities among trusted servants. For example, a chairperson, who may or may not have the technical skills needed for web maintenance, could be in charge of verifying and updating information submitted to the website. Other trusted servants or committee members, who are delegated responsibilities through the committee, could manage the technical aspects of the website.

Discussing and addressing known challenges with Internet technology

NA members often self-publish through personal websites. A note of caution (as outlined in Chapter Two) is to avoid stating that a person is an NA member. Using language like “recovery” and “twelve-step program” can help a site avoid being mistaken as an area or regional site of Narcotics Anonymous.

If a member has used NA’s name on a personal website, then it is especially important not to use pictures of any members on that site, just as an area or region would avoid posting members’ pictures on its website. The use of members’ pictures in association with NA falls outside the principle of anonymity. If pictures are used on a personal site, the NA name should not be used, for the reasons described above.

Someone’s voice being heard on the web doesn’t compromise our anonymity in the same way that pictures can. Some NA websites post members’ sharing so that NA’s message can be accessed around the world via the website. This approach seems to maintain members’ anonymity better than a picture or video would. If a member chooses to participate in sharing that is made accessible via the web, it is important to remember that the share may come into public view. It also may be worth considering avoiding graphic descriptions of active addiction in shares posted on the web.

“It is important to remember that there isn’t the same kind of personal anonymity online as there is in an NA meeting.”

It is important to remember that there isn’t the same kind of personal anonymity online as there is in an NA meeting. In most cases, Internet communications can be tracked back to the user or individual computer and can be made available to outside parties or agencies (except when sophisticated encryption or other technologies are used). In an effort to keep private information out of the public’s view, message boards or chat rooms used for online meetings or service-related discussions should be made as private as possible. That way, the public cannot view the history or post to these forums. Passwords and other systems such as peer-to-peer instant messaging can provide a level of privacy. When considering personal anonymity and NA’s public image, it is important to keep in mind that having publicly available postings or messages means that whatever is posted online can be viewed by any Internet user in the world for long periods of time.

Putting your plan into action

Uses of Internet technology and NA websites

The following list contains examples of how areas and regions have used the web to communicate with each other and with the public:

- 📄 One of the most important uses of Internet technology is to **provide information about NA**. Websites are often the first glimpse someone will have of what the NA program is—whether the viewer is a professional, a family member, or an addict trying to find a meeting. When thinking about how to manage a website’s information, it is important to remember that misinformation can be worse than no information at all.
- 📄 Another use of NA Internet technology is **communication among service bodies**. Bulletin boards, chat rooms, and email lists are commonly used to hold service meetings, especially in areas encompassing large geographic distances. An unmediated forum,

however, is like a service meeting with no chair or facilitator—if there is no set agenda, the focus can easily be lost. Addresses for email lists can be created based on service titles instead of an individual’s name—for example, vicechair@thebiggestheartofNAarea. This allows for continuity when members rotate service positions. The anonymity of members in these forums can be protected through the use of a sign-up process or passwords.

- 📄 If the area wants to post **NA literature online**, it should do so by linking to NAWs’ website, www.na.org. An area should not reproduce and post any of the fellowship’s copyrighted literature, including the steps or traditions, the readings, IPs, or lengthy quotes. For more information regarding the *Fellowship Intellectual Property Trust*, visit www.na.org.
- 📄 If an area is thinking about posting **non-fellowship-approved information** such as flyers or local newsletters, trusted servants may want to consider how that type of information might affect NA’s public image. Member-focused literature may not always be the kind of information an area wants to publicly display. A group conscience is a good way to make decisions about whether or not to post non-fellowship-approved information on a local website.
- 📄 Various **language groups**, like Spanish-speaking members who live in various countries around the world, have used the web for communication, including service workshops and translations efforts.
- 📄 Some areas maintain archival information such as past service projects or trusted servants’ contact information in **databases**. However, the area will want to request that the person who is responsible for creating the database also be responsible for making the information transferable and easily accessible by other trusted servants, including future trusted servants. Any information in a database should be backed up and stored in a common place, not on someone’s personal hard drive, and needs to be easily accessible through the most common technology available. Archiving and updating information contained in the database will help to keep a relevant record of the committee’s practices. Remembering the purpose of the information and who the audience is can help the area make decisions about how to manage a database.
- 📄 Some **online NA meetings** are held in chat rooms and some are held through email lists. Again, member anonymity needs to be preserved through a sign-up process or some other protocol. It is important to remember that online NA meetings may come into the view of the public and have the potential to affect the public’s perception of NA. One of the pitfalls of an online meeting can be overly casual conversation that doesn’t seem to be driven by NA’s primary purpose.

Internet technology is a valuable tool that has allowed NA members to communicate with each other and with the public in ways that were previously impossible. Taking some time to discuss and plan for how to best use this technology can help to ensure that the information we share with each other and present to the public is reliable, meaningful, and informative.

Resources

Steps for creating an ASC website

Sample webpage